

# Detroit's Continuing Program on Human Relations

## Introduction

The 1953 Ordinance creating the Detroit Commission on Community Relations spells out the broad outlines of its responsibility to seek to correct situations which are found to endanger the peace and welfare of the community.

"The Commission shall receive and may investigate claims and reports of tension, conflict, and practices of discrimination or of efforts or activities of individuals or groups to incite discord, tension, hate and suspicion, or to place at a disadvantage persons or groups because of race, color, origin or ancestry."

The Commission is a tax-supported, governmental human relations agency. This agency is doing what government has always done best—it is bringing people together to solve community problems.

Created first in 1944 as the Mayor's Interracial Committee, this city department was charged with the responsibility of taking positive steps to reduce and eliminate the dangerous racial tensions and hostilities which were present in our community following the infamous race riot of June 1943.

The effective work of the Interracial Committee in the control of racial incidents and community tensions received local and national recognition. With the broadly based support of individuals and community organizations in May of 1953 the Commission Council passed and the Mayor signed into law an Ordinance officially establishing the Commission on Community Relations and broadening its work.

This Ordinance, as the foundation for the work of the Commission and its staff, provides the means by which the people of Detroit control racial tensions, resolve incidents which threaten community peace, and eliminate some of our city's deeply imbedded discriminatory practices which cause much of the tension.

During 1957 the Commission's work was important in controlling the open racial hostility that was evidenced in

several dramatic incidents which developed in Detroit. Equally important steps were taken by the Commission in 1957 to focus attention on racial restrictions in the use of public accommodations and in hospital facilities and to seek peaceful solutions of these complex community problems at their root source.

Keeping track of the intergroup health of our community is the work of the Director and staff of seven professional employees. The Commission on Community Relations, itself, is composed of 25 members, eight of whom are representative citizens of the community appointed by the Mayor, and seven are the executive heads of city departments who are in direct and daily contact with the public. As the policy making body, the Commission takes responsibility for developing the kinds of programs which will bring concrete evidence that democracy in our city includes the rights and equality of every citizen before the law.

However, it is the people of Detroit, both as individuals and through their organizations, who have recognized their responsibility as citizens to contribute to the eradication of some of the deeply embedded racial prejudices, traditions, and hostilities. Working with the Commission they help to foster democratic ideals throughout government and the entire community. With their help the Commission was able to make significant progress toward resolving some of the serious racial problems which confronted the people of Detroit during 1957.

## Resolving Specific Incidents

The number of cases the Commission on Community Relations and its staff work on each year is an index of the racial tensions and hostilities in our Detroit community. In 1957 each of the incidents differed in terms of the community problems which were represented, the number of people involved, and the control measures required to limit the racial tensions and prevent any sharpening of hostilities that might lead to community violence.

In January 1957, staff investigations began with a report that a rock with a threatening note attached had been thrown through the window of a home in southwest Detroit. The Negro family involved were the first newsmen to occupy property on this street. The year ended with a December 31st investigation of violence resulting in property damage to a home in a northwest area undergoing racial change.

During the entire year the staff handled a total of 65 cases and an equal number of formal consultations with community leadership and governmental authorities seeking solutions to specific problems involving some phase of racial relations in our city. The cases ranged from complaints of landlord-tenant problems to situations which involved property damage and other serious evidences of community tension. Grouped into categories the cases included: Housing—21; Public Accommodation—8; Juvenile Behavior—9; Police-Community Relations—13; Other City Departments—5; Other Investigations—11.

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The Values That Represent a City. The spirit of goodwill was reflected in the Department of Parks and Recreation choral group which inaugurated the festive Christmas season in Detroit's Civic Center.

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Below are comparative statistics for other years.

	Police	Arrests	Arrests	Police	City	Year	Total
	Hearings	Arrests	Arrests	Arrests	Arrests	Arrests	Arrests
1954	15	6	4	0	1	11	37
1955	20	6	4	2	0	8	40
1956	17	3	9	2	2	8	41
1957	21	8	9	11	5	11	65

As one of its methods for controlling racial tensions, staff investigations become the basis for a coordinated effort by which the Commission, law enforcement officials, governmental and community leaders could undertake to resolve incidents or other evidence of community conflict and protect the individual rights of any citizen.

Perhaps the incident which threatened the peace of our Detroit community most sharply occurred on Chrysler Avenue in February 1957. Here the reaction of some people to the arrival of a Negro housewife was so severe that it drew nation-wide attention. Crowds of demonstrators walked the streets nightly for a period of two weeks and the home sold to a Negro woman was repeatedly damaged. Order was restored through the joint work of the Police Department, Commission and community leadership. A significant development in this neighborhood crisis came when the police involved the Michigan National Guard in unlawful assembly in dealing with the crowd. An end of the demonstration came with the arrest and conviction of one of the demonstrators on a charge of disturbing the peace. Seven months after the home had been sold, the police removed their 24 hour guard from the property. The basic American right which was involved in this case—the right of any person regardless of race to own and occupy property in peace—was maintained.

Not all the cases which came to the attention of the Commission involved the threat of physical violence or the destruction of property. The Commission's objective at all times is to solve problems before they grow into serious dimensions involving large numbers of people. Effective operation in 1957 was based on prompt staff action to gather facts and bring together the people involved in the problems to reason out the issues involved.

Builders Play a Part in Changing Detroit. Needed public improvements such as expressways, playgrounds and new housing called for the planned removal of houses and people. Staff had a continuing interest in relocation and public housing problems. The Commission's education program was focused on creating greater understanding among all Detroiters. Our Community Service program was utilized particularly in racially and religiously changing neighborhoods.



Minority of a City Affirmed in Hearing. Three outstanding Detroit religious leaders affirmed the dedication of their faith to the ideals of "peace and neighborliness" among all citizens. From left to right are Rev. Robert Allen, Dr. Rev. Richard S. Emrich and Rabbi Morris Adler. They jointly declared that "The denial of the right to home ownership to any reputable citizen because of race or creed represents a basic violation of the religious spirit as well as of fundamental principles."



# Citizens' Work on Community Problems



Expanding Opportunities in Nursing. Since the first hospital and medical study was issued in June of 1956, opportunities without regard to race have steadily increased at all levels of nurse training and employment.

The people of this and other communities have seen ample evidence of the destructive effect of racial tensions and community violence. Accordingly the Commission on Community Relations during 1957 took responsibility for developing and initiating two particular projects to focus public attention on basic community patterns out of which discriminatory situations and community racial tensions have developed.

Of all the problems dealt with by the Commission few produce more obvious racial tensions or more open hostilities between people than does the denial of service in places of public accommodation for reasons related to race; few are more costly to the total community than racial restrictions in the use of hospital facilities of the total community, or result in more wasteful use of human resources than limitations because of race in opportunity for medical or nursing training.

The Ordinance creating the Commission outlines the general method of Commission procedure in working on community problems: "The Commission shall seek to correct through negotiation and education those situations which it finds to be endangering the peace and welfare of the community or to be unjust and discriminatory."

The specific approach taken by the Commission in 1957 with reference to public accommodations and hospital facilities was to create two Citizens' committees with specific responsibility to help the Commission review the community practices and make recommendations for solution.

Basic to the Commission's planning and service of the citizens on these committees is the belief that problems solved strengthen our community as all people share—regardless of race—in the responsibility for its common welfare. Results already evident show a broadening of participation of all people in the total life of the community.

## Advisory Committee on Hospitals

The Commission created in March 1957, a citizens' committee known as the Advisory Committee on Hospitals. This Committee, chaired by Bishop Richard S. Estrich of the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan, includes twenty-two persons associated with business, labor, hospital, medical, and nursing institutions in the community.

This Committee was formed to follow up on the Medical and Hospital Study which was completed with citizen help by the Commission on Community Relations in 1956. Shortly after its formation, the citizens' group undertook its assignment of not only surveying practices, but also seeking the cooperation of medical and nursing

schools and hospitals in following up the recommendations of the Study Committee for the elimination of racial factors and discriminatory practices where they are found to exist.

Upon resurvey of policies and practices of the two college nursing programs offered in Detroit, the Committee has reported to the Commission on Community Relations that these programs are operating without discrimination in the admission and training of nursing students. As the year ended the resurvey of schools of medicine and preliminary fact gathering in hospitals was underway. The research services staff of the Commission works directly with the Advisory Committee to provide for their review and evaluation the data obtained from the schools and hospitals under study.

## Equal Public Accommodations

In August 1957, the Commission created and sponsored the work of a twenty-member Citizens' Committee on Equal Public Accommodations. Chaired by Rev. Jewell Snook of Southmore Methodist Church, this committee is composed of outstanding individuals representative of business, labor, church, and minority group leadership in Detroit. It has as its goal, making recommendations to achieve racially unrestricted use of public accommodations, both by residents of the community, and any persons who may be visiting Detroit either as individuals or as members of convention groups.

The Commission's community services staff works with this group. The citizens' committee decided to initiate its work with a study of restaurant service practices, and took steps to deal with the overall problem by setting up a Subcommittee on Legal Procedures and one on Education.



Here's Where Ability Counts. Places of public accommodation, like hotels, bowling alleys and restaurants, that serve all people equally, will help to make Detroit outstanding for convenience and citizens' skills.

# Education Division

Many happenings during 1957 on the local and national scene precipitated some searching questions about the quality and rate of progress in human relations in the Detroit community. This awareness and concern on the part of individuals and organizations is reflected in the increased number of requests for conferences with Commission staff members to help in the planning of educational programs, projects, institutes and conferences.

The Commission staff participated in 378 different programs of education for better human relations in 1957. Compared with the previous year, 60 programs or 4 times the number of films, and filmstrips and other program aids have been loaned to different groups in the community. Approximately 30,000 individual pieces of literature were requested and distributed.

Following the mandates of its Ordinance to reach the total community by working with and through organized groups, the Commission's objectives are to "cooperate with other governmental, educational, civic, and community groups in informational programs designed to increase mutual understanding among the many residents of the community."



*Detroit Times Photo*

**Friendship and Service — Human Relations Goal for Youth and Community.** Reflecting the human relations of a city are such youth service organizations as the Boy Scouts which serves some 64,000 boys regardless of race, religion, social, economic, ethnic or national background.

A review of requests for program services during the past year shows that they reflect patterns of race relations in the Detroit community. Racial conflict or tension today is not diffused over the entire community as was the situation when the Interracial Committee was created in 1944. In 1957 the tensions were concentrated around specific incidents generally on a neighborhood level.

While this neighborhood emphasis in requests for services is welcome, the Commission has continued to try to carry out its educational program to make impact on the overall general community scene as well.

As a part of its educational program the Commission continued its cooperative work with approximately 50 organizations and groups in the community in the Coordinating Council on Education and Research in Human Relations. Working through its Executive Board, its committees on Program, Research, and Evaluation, and its regular monthly membership meetings, the Coordinating Council serves as an effective clearing house for information about community educational activities, and is a means for effectively coordinating and developing educational programs to increase understanding among our many Detroit citizens. In 1957 the membership meetings of the Coordinating Council brought to the community the newest developments in human relations, provided reports on the variety of experiences and events and, through its sponsorship of the Leadership Clinic, permitted the exchange of valuable points of view on human relations problems and ways of improving practices.



**It Takes People to Achieve Human Relations Goals.** Representatives of social service agencies gather monthly under the auspices of the Coordinating Council on Human Relations to exchange information and develop programs.

1957

## Annual Report

DETROIT COMMISSION ON  
COMMUNITY RELATIONS

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Education Division

